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FRIDAY

ON STAGE

THEATER & MUSIC

"This way [without a major-label deal], we're having a lot more fun." —Al Bouchard, drummer for the Brain Surgeons

CHECK IT OUT

THIS WEEK'S HOT PICKS

MUSIC

BLONDIE: Relevance? You want relevance with your rock and roll? Why, when you can revel in what, recent recordings aside, is still a wonderful nostalgia act. 9 p.m. Sunday, House of Blues, 329 N. Dearborn St. $47.50; 312-923-2000.

Debbie Harry and Blondie pay a visit to the House of Blues.

CASH AUDIO: There's something exhilarating about two guys and a whole lot of noise. The rockabilly-inflected stylings of this duo rock the house. 10 p.m. Saturday, Abbey Pub, 3420 W. Grace St. $10; 773-478-4100.

PRINCESS SUPERSTAR: The humorously hyperbolic name notwithstanding, the Princess is one of the hottest things on the underground hip-hop scene right now. 10 p.m. Friday, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western Ave. $10; 773-276-3600.

NEW EDITION, EN VOGUE: On the one hand are legitimate R&B stars, smooth all-male rhythms. On the other is a female group of effortless grace. 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Arie Crown Theatre, 2300 S. Lake Shore Drive. $50.50-$65.50; 312-559-1212.

ROY HAYNES: Haynes is a melodious example of the kind of drummer who is always musical and rarely overplays. Tuesday-Aug. 4, Jazz Showcase, 59 W. Grand Ave. $20; 312-670-2473.

HAMIETT BLUIETT, D.D. JACKSON, KAHIL EL'ZABAR TRIO: Bluiett is a reedist of exceptional inventiveness. 9 p.m. Thursday, HotHouse, 31 E. Balbo Drive. $15-$16; 312-362-9707.

YES: The days of prog rock, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, are back. Sure it's arty and overblown, but so what? 8 p.m. Friday, Chicago Theatre, 175 N. State St. $40-$80; 312-559-1212.

THEATER

'A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM'

I wasn't dying to see a 75-minute, family-friendly abridgement of Shakespeare's perennial; the whole notion of "Short Shakespeare!" on Navy Pier sounds a little ... you know ...something. But director Gary Griffin's sleek, brisk, inventive staging pays off, and the cast ensures that the verse doesn't get lost in the shtick. Through Aug. 17 (1 a.m. Wed., Fri., Sat.; 2 p.m. Thurs.) at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Navy Pier; $10-$15; 312-595-5600.

"1776": An honest, unsentimental and superbly cast revival of the ever-ambitious musical about the men behind the Declaration of Independence. Through Aug. 25, Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire, 10 Marriott Drive, Lincolnshire. $37-$42; 847-634-0200.

MUSIC/ PLAY ON

Bouchard still lives, rocks on

Ex-Blue Oyster Cult Drummer having fun

The Brain Surgeons, who headline Saturday at the Heartland Café, aren't nearly as well known as drummer Al Bouchard's former band, Blue Oyster Cult. But the music is in many ways just as adventurous.

Greg Kot
Tribune rock critic

The Brain Surgeons explore everything from punk screeds to layered acoustic folk-pop.

Over a half-dozen albums, the Brain Surgeons explore everything from punk screeds to layered acoustic folk-pop, avant-garde percussion to heavy-metal head-banging. On one recent release, the double-CD "Piece of Work," they do justice to everything from doo-wop to Lynyrd Skynyrd (a poignant cover of "Simple Man").

It makes sense, because Bouchard was one of Blue Oyster Cult's key songwriters, and great songs were what defined that band even more so than its mirrored shades and black-magic iconography. Tunes cowritten by Bouchard have been covered by everyone from the Minutemen ("The Red and the Black") to Metallica ("Astronomy"), and been appropriated by television shows ("That '70s Show" used "Cities on Flame with Rock and Roll"). The royalties have helped him maintain his do-it-yourself operation with the Brain Surgeons; the band runs its own label, Cellrum Records (cellrum.com), and books its own tours.

"If we had a strong offer from a major label, we'd totally sell out," Bouchard says with a laugh, in an interview from the band's office on the upper West Side of Manhattan. "But this way, having total control, we're having a lot more fun. I'm actually losing less money doing it this way, if you think about the time that it takes to get a major-label project up and running. I've produced enough bands over the years to know that a band signed to a major can work for years, and then not even have an album come out. This way, I always have something to build on. We are constantly writing songs, more than we can record, and we have a group of people that always comes to see us. It's like this little Brain Surgeons social circle."

In contrast, the other members of Blue Oyster Cult play more than 100 shows a year at much larger venues, even though they have not been nearly as prolific as Bouchard in writing new material.

In its original '70s incarnation, the Cult played as many as 300 shows a year, filling arenas around the world with a twisted brand of heavy metal, wrapped in S&M leather and irony.

"We were originally a pretty serious psychedelic blues band, but when we decided to go with the heavy metal thing, it was a hoot," Bouchard says. "Black Sabbath was our big influence, woo-hoo! We were all much more into the Ozzy (Osbourne) side of the band, rather than the Tommy (Iommi) self-serious side. Ozzy was the lovable drunk, a comical figure almost—we never bought into that black magic stuff. When Columbia Records signed us, they already had a hard rock band in Aerosmith, and Clive Davis said the label wanted us to sound a little darker. So we listened to Black Sabbath, had a good laugh, and said, 'We'll do this!' Some people said Blue Oyster Cult isn't real heavy metal. No kidding! That was never the point."

Nonetheless, BOC's subversive impact on a generation of young listeners was immense, with concepts and lyrics cooked up by a brain trust of aside intellectuals, including producer Sandy Pearlman, rock critic Richard Meltzer, Patti Smith and the band itself. "Mike Watt [of the Minutemen] says our music gets more popular anytime there is a Republican in office," Bouchard says. "We were anti-Establishment but not political. We had our own black humor, even though some of our fans missed it—it was sort of scary and depressing to see that. It was entertainment! People hear our stuff, they smile and sing along. It was meant to make life more tolerable."

But the band burned out from its excesses and, after Bouchard's departure in 1981, it was never quite the same. Bouchard blames himself for the break-up.

"It's a lot like 'Spinal Tap,' involving groupies and girlfriends, and me making a fool of myself in public," he says. "The solution was to remove myself from the band before I destroyed all their marriages. It was demolition derby. They made the right choice in dumping me. But time smoothes over everything. We laugh about it now."

The Brain Surgeons are the latest project of former Blue Oyster Cult drummer Albert Bouchard.

Albert Bouchard (center) seen here with former bandmates in Blue Oyster Cult, during the group's halcyon days.

Bouchard doesn't envision rejoining his old bandmates full-time, though he's working on a side project with Blue Oyster Cult guitarist Donald Roeser. Bouchard is married to Brain Surgeons guitarist Deborah Frost, a music critic who is his cowriter on many songs and the mother of his 15-year-old son.

"I wouldn't want to tour that extensively," he says. "In a couple of years, my teenage boy won't be able to stand the sight of me. But now we hang out all the time."

Though about half the Brain Surgeons' set is composed of Bouchard's Blue Oyster Cult material, the band's striking originals—with Frost and Bouchard sharing vocals—hold up against the drummer's formidable past.

"It would be nice to sell as many records as Blue Oyster Cult still does," Bouchard says. "But I want to be involved in music, and I also want to call the shots in how my music reaches the public. This allows me to do both."

Hear Greg Kot on "Sound Opinions" at 10 p.m. every Tuesday on WXRT (93.1) FM.

The Brain Surgeons
When: 10 p.m. Saturday
Where: Heartland Café, 7000 N. Glenwood Ave.
Price: $10; 773-465-8005

RAVINIA:

Ravinia Festival indulges in some theatrics

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Julie Project," "These narrations seem to provide an entry-level concert experience for people who want an introduction to the orchestra."

Later in the summer, an evocatively named puppeteer called Basil Twist (the creator of the Off-Broadway show "Symphonie Fantastique") will accompany the Eos Orchestra as part of a program called "Puppets and Spain."

And from Aug. 22-24, Ravinia continues its ongoing "Sondheim at 75" series, an ongoing collection of concert performances designed to honor the great American composer of Broadway musicals. Under the direction of the much-admired Lonny Price, this year's production will be "A Little Night Music" starring Patti LuPone and George Hearn and featuring the busy Chicago performer Hollis Resnik.

Even the indefatigable Michael Halberstam, the artistic director of the Glencoe-based Writers' Theatre Chicago is getting in on the Ravinia act. Halberstam will serve as the stage director for Ravinia's "semi-staged" Chicago premiere of the Sergei Rachmaninoff opera "Francesca da Rimini" on Aug. 10.

Longtime fans of the festival will recall that it actually has a long and storied history of opera and theater production (especially at the indoor Martin Theatre), and included the word "dramatic" in its mission statement in the 1940s. Dance has also been a part of the summer season for years. Still, it's fair to say that the recent uptick in theatrical programming at Ravinia is a response to what the festival's leaders perceive as changes in audience tastes.

Welz Kauffman, Ravinia's president and chief executive officer, also sees theater as a way to build audiences. "Audiences for classical music are just not growing in the way we would like to see," he says. "A lot of people are put off by the idea of going to an orchestral concert. We've never been about dumbing down the art, but we need to change the way we present music to our audiences. People are more willing to come when there are some spoken words."

Last year Ravinia presented a program that blended elements of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and the music of Mendelssohn. The cast included John Mahoney (standing second from left).

Beginning last season, Ravinia started making a bigger commitment to theater—especially musical theater—and it has tried to utilize both local performers and international stars. "There's such a vibrant and creative theater scene in Chicago," Kauffman says. "Tapping into that world is a way of bringing people to our sandbox who have not been here before."

Last year, de Lancie put together a music-drama piece combining "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and the work of Mendelssohn. But since some 38 composers have written music linked in some way to this particular piece of Shakespeare, this year de Lancie chose to pair the words of "Romeo and Juliet" with a wide variety of musical works—including fare by Berlioz, Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky.

De Lancie, an outspoken promoter of music-theater hybrid shows, says he's encountered some resistance in various places from administrators and critics who think that classical music should be presented in a strictly concert format. But, he argues, audiences don't worry so much about mixing genres.

"The objections are in the minds of the people who run American orchestras," DeLancie says, "the audience is way ahead."

Still, you won't be seeing the full play of course. De Lancie says he will emphasize the death of Tybalt and the procuring of Juliet's poison. There will be two actors, two singers and two dancers. "We're telling the story of Romeo and Juliet and then using music to provide the emotional weight," de Lancie says. "Otherwise we'd need a cast of thousands."

But what about that thorny issue of a lawn without a view of the stage?

Kauffman admits that the layout of the park means it's unlikely Ravinia would currently present, say, a full-blown Broadway show in its main pavilion. But he says discussions are taking place about how to incorporate the lawn picnickers in the theatrical activity inside the pavilion.

He's interested in getting actors out on the lawn (so watch out this weekend). And, although he knows it's a controversial idea, Kauffman also is musing about putting up a big screen for certain music-theater or dance events.

"I wouldn't want anything garish or gaudy," he says. "But a lot of other venues like ours are doing it. We want to suck people in."

For more information on the individual musical-theater performances at the Ravinia Festival, call 847-266-5100.

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